



## Early Journal Content on JSTOR, Free to Anyone in the World

This article is one of nearly 500,000 scholarly works digitized and made freely available to everyone in the world by JSTOR.

Known as the Early Journal Content, this set of works include research articles, news, letters, and other writings published in more than 200 of the oldest leading academic journals. The works date from the mid-seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries.

We encourage people to read and share the Early Journal Content openly and to tell others that this resource exists. People may post this content online or redistribute in any way for non-commercial purposes.

Read more about Early Journal Content at <http://about.jstor.org/participate-jstor/individuals/early-journal-content>.

JSTOR is a digital library of academic journals, books, and primary source objects. JSTOR helps people discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content through a powerful research and teaching platform, and preserves this content for future generations. JSTOR is part of ITHAKA, a not-for-profit organization that also includes Ithaka S+R and Portico. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

## THE FRENCH PAST DEFINITE, IMPERFECT, AND PAST INDEFINITE

Prolonged as have been the discussions of the relative value of the past tenses, many individual cases of the occurrence of the imperfect and perfect are still refractory when measured by the usual definitions, and weary if not wearisome is the travail of certain writers who strive to fit them to their respective beds. Yet these procrustean efforts have not been without their value, above all if they have prepared our minds to readjust in some measure the framework into which the unfortunate *praeterita*, willy nilly, have been thrust. The definition which makes of the imperfect the tense for continuation or repetition may seem, when liberally viewed, broad enough to offer a place even to the wanderers who in various languages and epochs surprise us by straying into this fold; for they at least, whenever and wherever begotten, show some noticeable family resemblances. Manifold examples, however, of the first or simple perfect, or, to use the French name, the past definite, must be sadly distorted if they are to fit any one of the usual descriptions of the tense. This is equally true, whether we accept the past definite as representing a single act in the more remote past, or as a tense which we are to recognize by a tag, namely, the expression or at least the vivid suggestion of a date in the past, fixing, as the French name indicates, the past definite as a point, while the imperfect is to be looked upon as a line. Similarly the second or present perfect (past indefinite) can in many instances hardly be said to mark completion in the present to any greater degree than the past definite. Further, in numerous examples the past definite marks a degree of continuance or a repetition that certainly suggests the line rather than the point, and thus seems to infringe on the domain assigned to the imperfect. Add to this an extraneous but no less disturbing element, namely, the inroads the past indefinite has made and is still making on the domain which we all recognize as belonging by right to the past definite, and we can at least feel some sympathy

for those who suspect each new discussion of tense differences of being a *salle des pas perdus*.

Let us take a few examples, of the types often cited in such discussions, in illustration of the difficulties I have mentioned. I wish to bring out through them that the past definite does not always indicate a single act in past time and is not always fixed as a point by a more or less visible dating.<sup>1</sup> It will be noticed also how well many of them, according to the usual definition of the imperfect, might seem to demand rather that tense.

*Petit à petit les ateliers se vidèrent.*<sup>2</sup>

*Tous perdirent leur temps; le faisceau résista.*<sup>3</sup> (When brothers were making successive efforts to break the bundle of sticks.)

*Napoléon fut un grand général.*

*Pendant quinze jours il travailla.*

*Plusieurs fois il perdit son chemin.*

*Elle n'eut jamais de réponse à cette lettre.*

*Malgré ses voyages et les soins du médecin, son mal dura.*

If the impression I have formed of many of the discussions of this question is correct, their chief weakness lies in a desire to formulate definitions according to which a speaker is obliged to employ a certain tense under given circumstances regardless of his mental attitude toward the assertion he is making. The rules are too purely formal and fail to recognize the fact that the simplest thought is made up of a number of elements, some one of which the speaker usually selects and brings by one means or another into greater prominence than the rest. This is the cause which determines the choice of one or another related tense. What in a given instance determines the choice of the imperfect is not that it and it alone expresses duration or repetition in past time. Such a statement we have seen will not hold. The speaker uses the imperfect because of an intent *to stress, to fix the attention upon the duration or repetition*, and this the imperfect accomplishes.

With such a conception in mind, a slight alteration suffices to make the definition of the imperfect sufficient. Tense is not

<sup>1</sup> Even as a sign board for inexperienced travelers the naming of a date in the past may be a misleading guide. The following are excellent French: *Le lundi suivant, à deux heures précises, il entra chez son ami; Une grande tristesse tout à coup l'envahissait.*

<sup>2</sup> Daudet, *Le petit chose*, p. 3.

<sup>3</sup> La Fontaine, *Fables*, IV, 18.

necessarily the mere expression of time or of some modal quality;<sup>1</sup> the tense is rather chosen with a view to *stressing* a temporal or modal value.

The imperfect then is the tense used to stress continuance or repetition in the past. Mere continuance or repetition does not suffice to make the imperfect indispensable, as is seen from the examples of the past definite given earlier. The imperfect is brought in only when the speaker desires to *call attention* to the presence in the activity of one of these two elements. Properly speaking, the imperfect is a present in the past. The speaker, instead of looking back into the past, as he does when he uses the past definite, transfers himself to the time of the action, so that he is an onlooker. He announces the events in a form which is, so to speak, a present; he feels them as something going on (continuing), or recurring (repeated).<sup>2</sup> The transference of himself to this standpoint is generally due to his desire to bring out the prolongation of the activity.

This conception of the tense makes clear the cases where according to more inelastic rules the past definite would be expected. If an action which occupied only a quickly passing moment is expressed by the imperfect, the abnormal stress on duration where real duration is absent indicates that the speaker is immobilizing this action in order to bring it clearly before the hearer's eyes as in a picture, and the hearer's mental vision is so intently directed to this point in the succession of moments constituting the narration that he is hypnotized into seeing it as if it were actually before him. We have here a pictorial imperfect.<sup>3</sup>

*Ils arrivaient au Pont de la Concorde, ils le traversèrent en silence, puis ils longèrent le Palais Bourbon.*<sup>4</sup>

*La lecture finie, le Père Alphée se dressait, marchait à grands pas. . . . Plus calme, le Père Melchior félicitait Méraut sur son livre.*<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> That tense can express modal as well as temporal quality is well known; see Herbig, *Indogerm. Forsch.*, Vol. VI, pp. 151-289.

<sup>2</sup> This is the reason why a succession of the imperfects forming a group usually indicates contemporaneous activities. They are all of a time which the speaker in his mental vision conceives of as a present, and present activities are essentially contemporaneous.

<sup>3</sup> See Brunetière, *Le roman naturaliste*, pp. 84, 85. For Italian examples see Fornaciari, *Studi romanzi*, fasc. 2, pp. 27-39.

<sup>4</sup> Maupassant, *Bel Ami*, p. 163. The two men had been walking on, absorbed in conversation. The statements which follow in the quotation as given indicate that the *ils arrivaient* does not mean "they were approaching," but "they reached."

<sup>5</sup> Daudet, *Les rois en exil*, p. 33.

In explanation of the not infrequent appearance of the imperfect when a verb of saying breaks or follows the quotation, there is often cited the fact that the action of the verb of saying lasts as long as the quotation and therefore marks continuation. If this be the speech-feeling toward verbs of saying, we should look for the imperfect as the usual or even the exclusive tense when such a verb accompanies a quotation. This is by no means the case. The usual attitude with reference to these verbs when used in narration is to consider them as narrative tenses. The occurrence of the imperfect is exceptional, and is produced in this way: the speaker begins the quotation without introduction. It comes to the hearer's ear as something that is being said. When the verb of saying is reached, the introduction of a past definite would set the quotation back into its place in the narration, and instead there is a strong tendency to preserve the vividness by leaving the hearer in the standpoint he has assumed, that of an actual auditor of the words.<sup>1</sup> We have what might be termed an auditive imperfect.

The fixing of quickly passing events by the use of the imperfect, when applied to a succession of activities, has a striking result: it hastens these activities, for, in order that they may all be represented in one picture, they must follow each other with such rapidity that they shall seem to be simultaneous:

*Suffit, s'écria Sturel, qui rassemblait son chapeau, sa canne, ses gants, payait, se levait, décampait.*<sup>2</sup>

The past indefinite stresses that the activity named is complete at the present time. But we are the creatures of our environment and we ourselves stand in the present. Thus there is a strong temptation either to move the past up into our own time, making of it a historical present, or else to stress the element connecting it with us, its present completeness. The French has yielded to both these tendencies in an unusual degree. Even in the stronghold of conservatism, the literature, the tendency at all epochs to link the past to the present is strong save where some grappling-

<sup>1</sup>The French does this in two ways: by the use of the imperfect or of the historical present. English, which lacks the first resource, makes constant colloquial use of the second: "says he."

<sup>2</sup>Maurice Barrès, *Les déracinés*, p. 344.

hook, such as a date or a set position in a series of events, causes the stress to rest rather on the temporal remoteness from us of the activity mentioned, and here the writer, especially the historian, loves to transport the action, grappling-hook and all, bodily into the present. In the spoken language past indefinite and historical present have between them left no place for the past definite.<sup>1</sup> Adam and Abraham, Helen and Héloïse, Caesar and Charlemagne, if they are to come out of limbo at all, must take their place in the full glare of the boulevards, and there is no escape from our own day and generation save in prophecy.<sup>2</sup>

Now if the imperfect stresses duration or repetition in the past, and the past indefinite stresses completion in the present of a past action, what is the domain of the past definite? Here we find a complexity in marked contrast to the imperfect and past indefinite, a complexity going back to the Latin, which owed it in turn to the various elements of different origin and value that were united in the perfect tense. Thus the Latin perfect embraced the *s*-perfects, *v*-perfects, reduplicated perfects, and the participial *-tus* ending in passives and deponents, and was capable of a variety of stress which rivals that of its French successor. What wonder then that there is difficulty in giving a definition of the past definite that will cover all cases. Stress there is, now on one thing, now on another. At times it is on the non-duration of the action—the point as contrasted with the line; at times on the inception or the completion of the action, attention being directed to one point in the line; at times the speaker is interested only in summing up continued or repeated action or in stressing the reality of his assertion or the fact of its lying wholly in the past. The past definite is the only genuine past tense. It embraces those assertions of past activity in which the person employing it does not assume the position of a bystander viewing an activity which

<sup>1</sup> So also the Latin perfect with its perfect and aorist functions, instead of being a tense with two distinct values, probably represents only an adjustment of past actions in general to a present standpoint.

<sup>2</sup> Even here we are none too safe, since *je partirai demain* is, historically considered, equal to *j'ai à partir demain*, and since we can also say *je pars demain*. The conversational tenses are then the real present, the historical present, the present perfect, the future and future perfect, replaced at times by the present and present perfect, and finally the imperfect and pluperfect, which rather than true past tenses are pictures on the walls of the present.

extends up to him (present perfect) or in spirit placing himself near the distant event (imperfect). He is looking back at the distant activity.<sup>1</sup> This fact explains why assertions represented by the past definite can so often be analyzed as resembling a point in space as contrasted with a line. The distant view is not suited to emphasizing the extensiveness of an object or to stressing the prolongation of an activity. The railway train far off down the track is but a dot; the events of a long episode in early life may seem as we look back hardly more than a mere point.

The essential trait then of the past definite is its removal of the activity from the sphere of the present. This does not necessarily result in stressing any particular phase of the activity, but does not exclude the stressing of one or another phase. From the standpoint of stress it determines a negative definition. The past definite represents past action in those cases where the stress is not on continuation, repetition, or completion in the present. The assertion may, and often does, involve any one of these three but the stress will not be there, for to direct special attention to these you will either take the attitude of the onlooker and employ the imperfect or you will bring the activity into relation with the present and employ the present perfect. From a practical standpoint then the past definite may be considered as occupying the field left free by the imperfect and past indefinite. If there be such a thing as a simple statement of a past activity without stress on any element, it will go into the past definite. If there be stress on some element the past definite will still be used, provided this stress is not on duration, repetition, or completion in the present.

Let us apply this to some of the typical cases where we find the past definite. *En m'entendant, aussitôt il s'arrêta*; the stress is on the non-duration of the action. *Tout à coup il parla*; the speech which followed may have been long, but attention is particularly directed to the beginning of the action: "he broke the silence." *Petit à petit les ateliers se vidèrent*; the activity was continued for some time, yet the stress is not on this but on the

<sup>1</sup> See Gildersleeve's comparison of the Greek aorist and imperfect, *AJPh.*, Vol. XXIII, pp. 250-52. Corbett's *English Grammar*, reprint of 1906, p. 135, furnishes an example which brings out clearly the contrast of the visualizing value of the imperfect and the backward look of the past definite: *Tous les jours les ouvriers donnaient de l'argent aux tyrans, qui en retour donnèrent aux ouvriers des cachots et des haches.*

fact that it was carried to completion: "the workshops became empty." When one brother after another had tried to break a bundle of sticks, La Fontaine says: *Tous perdirent leur temps; le faisceau résista*; the stress is not on the time consumed but on establishing the fact. *Il fut tout puissant; personne ne le craint plus*; here you are stressing not the fact of the duration of the activity but the fact that the activity lies wholly in the past. *Il était tout puissant* stresses the duration, and *il a été tout puissant*, which could have been used even in literary style in this very sentence, would stress the present termination rather than the past existence of his power. *Pendant un mois il partit chaque matin à sept heures; pendant quinze jours il travailla*; here there is certainly stress on repetition in the one case, duration in the other, but note that this stress is brought out independently of the verb by a separate phrase, and the law of economy dispenses with again expressing it through the tense of the verb, unless it is desired to give an additional stress to the element of duration. Similarly, when the meaning of the verb in itself implies continuation or repetition, the imperfect is not used save to lay an additional stress on the duration or repetition of the action: *Malgré ses voyages et les soins du médecin, son mal dura*.

As the past definite is the true past tense and represents the backward look, it tends to sum up and to give a comprehensive view of the whole activity. Thus it usually implies for us the completion of all the stages, beginning, period of activity, and end. The imperfect, representing the view-point of an onlooker, fixes some one moment in the activity, namely the one chosen by this onlooker, and neglects the rest. Thus it does not definitely embrace the inception and conclusion, and tends therefore to leave the duration of the activity undetermined.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Kalepky, in his illuminating articles on the two tenses (*ZfRPh.*, Vol. XVIII, pp. 498-510, and "Wissenschaftliche Beilage zum Jahresbericht des Folk-Realgymnasiums," *Program* Nr. 106, 1904), would even make the implication of a completion of all the stages of the activity the sole test of the past definite, and the absence of such an implication the test of the imperfect. Examples of imperfects of the types cited above from Maupassant, Daudet, and Barrès seem, however, to imply the completion of all the stages, and Kalepky's assertion that stress on the beginning of an action, with neglect of the completion, so frequent in the past definite, is not due to the use of that tense, but is a second meaning (inchoative), common to all tenses of the verbs in question, needs historical corroboration before it can be accepted. See Meyer-Lübke, *Grammatik*, Vol. III, §118, and also Kalepky, *Program*, p. 13, note.



Since the past tense to be used in a given instance is determined by a question of stress, of view-point, there will surely arise cases in which the choice will depend on the purpose or even on the general tendencies of the speaker. In a large majority of instances where we find the imperfect, it is the only admissible tense; in quite a number, however, this is not the case. In the following passage Zola might have employed the past definite: *Lui aussi la chassait, l'injuriait, en sentant remonter à ses joues le sang des gifles qu'il avait reçues. Mais elle ne se rebutait pas, elle l'obligeait à jeter la hache, elle l'entraînait par les deux bras, avec une force irrésistible.*<sup>1</sup> It must not be thought, however, that in such instances as this the imperfect and the past definite would have just the same value. The imperfect, fixing and prolonging the action, gives us a picture; the past definite is simply a narration. Certain modern authors, beginning with Chateaubriand, have a strong tendency toward imperfects,<sup>2</sup> some of them carrying this visualizing process to the extent of an abuse.

With the extension of the use of the past indefinite until, in addition to its original value, it has assumed in spoken French the functions of the past definite, the field of the past is, in conversation, divided into two parts, and a simple method of teaching the colloquial use of the past tenses is to define the sphere of the imperfect, leaving the rest of the ground to the past indefinite. The imperfect will be used when the speaker desires to lay stress on the duration, whether on account of its inherent importance or in order to visualize; elsewhere the past indefinite is the proper tense.

If this discussion has attained its end, I hope it may direct attention to the influence of stress as an element in determining the choice of tense, and to the possibility of simplifying in some measure tense-teaching by using, at least as one means, a negative test in explaining the use of the past definite or its conversational equivalent.

EDWARD C. ARMSTRONG

<sup>1</sup>Zola, *Germinal*, p. 416. Note the readiness with which there could be employed here the other method of visualization, the historical present.

<sup>2</sup>Compare for example the opening chapter of René Bazin's *Les Oberlé*, and numerous passages in Zola's works.